Santa Clara County Flora and Fauna

Field Wild Flowers

By Albert E. Johansson

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Notes:

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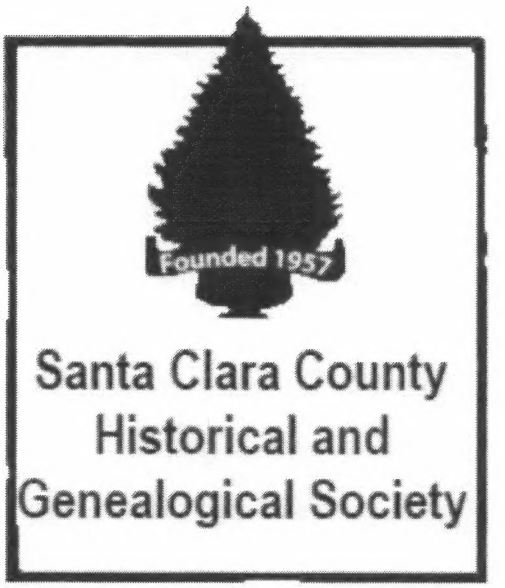

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FIELD WILD FLOWERS

The fame of California's flower fields has been carried around the world by visitors to the state. Not the least prolific of these fields are those that annually bloom in Santa Clara County, whose short season, beginning in February with California Poppy and Milkmaid, and ending in April when White Lupin dies, is often a color miracle. But, even though the period be short, it can be a time of profit to the amateur naturalist, as well as a season of pleasure to those who take joy in outdoor beauty.

The most famous of California's many blooms is its poppy. These flowers grow by the millions in Santa Clara Valley as well as on the slopes of the surrounding hills. They cover whole districts with a flare of orange flame in the spring, but as summer progresses the first glow of their bloom is quickly gone, and, while the individual flowers grow sparser, they also become debilitated and change to pale yellow.

The poppy was officially adopted as a state emblem in 1903. Its appropriateness for this purpose has been recognized long before. Its scenic virtue was even appreciated by the Indians, so often blind to natural beauty, who called it the "fire flower". They also had superstitutions about it. One was that a pregnant or nursing woman should not touch the petals lest she be unable to feed her child. In some places the tribes are said to have worshipped it.

Roadside ditches, dips, and low places in the

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hills are the haunt of California Buttercups. There they "catch the sun in their chalices". A less poetic function buttercups once held was that of providing the Indians with seeds, which they pounded into flour, and ate without cooking. The flour is said to have a flavor not unlike that of parched corn.

Sun Cup is a scarcely seen inhabitant of the Coast Range. It is a delicate little primrose whose succulent lower leaves are cut up for salad greens.

The Bush Monkey-flower, blooming a deep red; Sticky Monkey-flower, with a salmon colored corolla and a white stigma, and the Little and the Common Monkey-flowers all grow here. Though some have a wide distribution, they are most common in the foothills.

Bright yellow, or some variant of it, seems to be the favorite hue of the early blossoms that tint the open fields. The Yellow Pansy is not an exception to this rule. Its Spanish-American name was Gallito (little rooster), and its English one is often enough Johnny Jump-up.

One of the commonest weeds of the valley is the Yellow Mustard, whose heads form perfect carpets of color throughout valley orchards and paint the open foothills, too. The leaves of this plant are often boiled in the same manner as spinach. One of its advantages as food is its extreme cheapness, for it can be obtained in quantity free for the picking.

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A common little flower, and a very fragrant one, scattered over low ground and deeply hid by taller growths, is the Tidy Tips. Its bloom is yellow. Gold Fields, or the Sunshine, can be found. It has often been called the Fly Flower, because it is frequented by a fly which feeds on the blood of horses. This fly has been known to drive whole herds into stampede. In Spanish-American playing cards the Jack of Spades always held one of these blossoms in his hand.

The White Forget-me-not when in blossom looks much like a light fall of snow on the grass. Hence its name, the Spanish dimimutive for snow, Nievitas.

Evening Snow grows in shady hillside flats; Meadow Foam in damp places in the Coast Ranges, and the White Lupin, whose pagoda-shaped flowers are often very abundant, frequently turns whole fields white.

The Miners' Lettuce is a humble little denizen of most orchards. It was once eaten by the Indians, who bottled it, and, by the miners, who took it straight. The Indians had a quaint system of seasoning it. They boiled up a mess and then set out to find an ant hill. The ant hill found, they dumped the warm mess upon it, whereupon the ants, resenting the intrusion of this mushy green weight upon their home, climbed over and through it to investigate its nature. During their invasion they left formic acid from their jaws and feet throughout it. When they considered the food flavored

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sufficiently the tribesmen gathered it up, cleaned out the crawling black, or red, salt and pepper, and took the lettuce home to eat.

The growths called Tar Weed inhabit the county. The first is Madia elegans. Besides being a California plant, it inhabits that narrow stretch of South America called Chile. An oil of good quality can be made from it, and the plant itself had a medical use fifty years ago. The second Tar Weed is Hemizonia Luxulaefolia.

Ithurial's Spear is a blue native of the adobe fields which takes its name from the angel in Milton's epic.

Shooting Stars are shy, low gathering creatures. Due to their peculiar shape, school children call them Mad Violets. Baby Blue-eyes are patched over the Coast Range. They are a favorite annual in European gardens. Another blue-blossom, Phacilia, and still another, the Blue-bonnet, grown in ravines and on hillside fields. This latter may appear in a white form.

The Blue-and-white Lupin often tinges hills a delicate blue.

Red-stemmed Filaree is an imported bloom, but quite common. Then we have the Purple Sanicle whose effect, when blossoming in great numbers on grassy slopes, is striking.

On to another plebeian plant: the Wild Radish, which is commonly seen along the county roads. This root

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and its more civilized descendants have been known as an edible relish for at least two thousand years.

The Morning Glory is a pest - and a very real pest - to farmers. More especially is this true to truck-farmers; also to Japanese strawberry growers in the Santa Clara Valley. But, to the city dweller, and, in fact, to anyone who does not derive his living from the soil, "it is a thing of beauty", but not a "joy forever", for its blossoms fade and its petals decay, leaving only the memory of fragile trumpet shapes scattered over a soft, green carpet of leaves.

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